

## ALKBOROUGH

**First Circle:** All set?

So, step on, step in, best foot forward – for 100 paces, for 33 turns; for two minutes, for ten minutes, for an eternity...depending, that is, on *how* you go.

But how *to* go here?

Striding or running or hopping or jumping or marching;

On your knees in contemplation; or crawling in penance...

Dancing towards the virgin...or elbowing competitors; following the thread into the monster's lair...into the underworld; or descending into Hell.

Tracing: the movement of the spheres; or the perilous path of Christ; or the trip to Jerusalem...

On the Path of Life, your life: towards death, and – hopefully – resurrection.

Alone; hand-in-hand; all together....

In step; in procession; in file; carefully manoeuvring on horseback – tricky dressage...

Racing; drilling; doing 'the crane dance' ...Quietly; noisily, with other children...

Speeding, slowing, teetering in the bends; or proceeding with even measure.

To the centre: to hear the fairies sing; to slay the beast; to carry off the girl...

To ensure your salvation; to meet God...

One route: to your heart's desire...

Your way is clear, laid out before you: a single, though convoluted spiral...

Without junctions or false paths or dead-ends; or moments of choice or indecision...

Its logic pulling you in – in tight twists and sweeping arcs; clockwise, anti-clockwise...coiling and uncoiling...constraining and releasing...taking possession...

So let yourself go, submitting to its itinerary: become choreographed...

No need to panic: no fear of getting lost, your progress always in plain view.

Any deviation – taking short cuts, or attempts at cheating, or mazy wanderings – apparent to those who watch: observing idly; cheering expectantly; judging your performance...

Diarist Abraham de la Pryme – grandson of Flemish drainers, Vermuyden's men – sees it, in 1697. First account, though whether early or late difficult to know: *They have at this*

*town two Roman games, the one called Gillian's bore and the other Troy's walls. They are both nothing but great labarinths cut into the ground with the hill cast up round about them for the spectators to sitt roundabout on to behold the sport. The two labarinths are somewhat different in their turnings one from another.*

**Second circle:** pausing, for a moment of reflection...

Labyrinth: wormhole into the past – its past, your past.

Each turn, a re-turn: to thoughts of those who have already trod here; to memories of elsewhere, of encounters on other paths; to legendary tales of trails and trials...

On *common* ground: borrowing space, setting it aside...

A thing visual and physical – straightforward, metaphorical – but only pretending to symmetry, the one form it can never take.

Compressing a long path – hike, trek, march, ramble – here into a small space.

Space and practice come together, dissolving reason and pleasure: concept, plan, journey, experience bound tight...

But don't get *sidetracked*: certainly not by all this theorising...

As it takes hold, as you find your feet: look up, look out...

*Look forward... prō specere: here a true prospect – an extensive view of landscape; a viewpoint commanding a magnificent view of an estuary.*

**Third circle:** surging on now, channelled like water...

Agricultural inspector Arthur Young looks out here, in 1807: *The view of the windings of the Trent, and the rich level plain of meadow, all alive with great herds of cattle, bounded by distant hills of cultivation, are features of an agreeable county.*

Dramatist John Lyly is here before him, in 1592:

*The sun doth beat upon the plain fields...*

*The fresh air, which softly breathes from Humber floods...*

He points out a heap of small pebbles where once stood a stately temple of white marble dedicated to the God of the Sea – *and in right, being so near the sea.*

Marauding Danes tore it down – *even with the earth* – and so enraged the God that he *caused the seas to break their bounds; and to swell as far above their reach as men had swerved beyond their reason. Then might you see ships sail where sheep fed, anchors cast where ploughs go, fishermen throw their nets where husbandmen sow their corn, and fishes throw their scales where fowls do breed their quills. Then might you gather froth where now is dew, rotten weeds for sweet roses, and take view of monstrous mermaids instead of passing fair maids.*

But: *at last Neptune, either weary of his wrath or wary to do them wrong, upon condition consented to ease their misery. The condition was this: that at every five year's day, the fairest and chastest virgin in all the country should be brought unto this tree, and here being bound (whom neither parentage shall excuse for honour, nor virtue for integrity) is left as a peace offering. Then, he sendeth a monster called the Agar, against whose coming the waters roar, the fowls fly away, and the cattle in the field for terror shun the banks.*

Agar; aegir; Norse river god Oegir: 'Ware Oegir' boatmen on the Trent would cry at times when the water funnels and piles...As the in-rushing salty pushes wedge-like below the fresh: *Then the water flows with a white curling wave, varying, according to circumstance from one to four feet in perpendicular height, which has a very imposing appearance, running along the flats and shallows with considerable noise, and causing much commotion in the water.*

Fearsome...inexorable...monstrous...ogre...

Rivers always restless in their beds...

Picture this: without embankments, the Trent would stretch as far as the horizon, as Doncaster.

**Fourth circle:** wondering how long it has already taken, to come this far...

They appear: on a pillar of the cathedral porch in Lucca; described in the floor at Chartres, the 'Chemin de Jerusalem'; on the Mappa Mundi in Hereford, signifying Crete... Pilgrimage, crusade, world-picture in miniature: for the stay-at-homes; or those who have been and want reminding...A work *for* the imagination...

For a *medieval* imagination: picturing the straight and narrow, and its sudden reverses...

But Shakespeare knew them otherwise:

*The nine men's morris is fill'd up with mud,*

*And the quaint mazes on the wanton green,*

*For lack of tread, are undistinguishable.*

Wanton, not spiritual: place of game, sport, amusement...

Arthur Young is full of speculation, putting two and two together, making a lot:

*In it is a round work, formed into a labyrinth, which they call Julian's Bower. The places which go by this name, are generally discovered near Roman towns. They are circular works, made of banks of earth, in the form of a maze or labyrinth; the common people indulge an idea, that these are extraordinary things; and boys often divert themselves by running, in their various windings and turnings, through and back again. The doctor thinks it was one of the old roman games, which were brought into Italy from Troy; and that it took the latter, not from bower, an arbour, but from borough, any work consisting of earth ramparts; and the former from Julius, the son of Aeneas, who introduced it into Italy, according to the account of Virgil, in his fifth Aeneid. That the intent of it was to exercise their youth in military activity; and that it was also a practice of the ancient Britons, which they derived from their Phrygian descent.*

The *antiquarian* imagination – ever active, working overtime...

So *imagine* too, if you will, as you go...

**Fifth circle:** looking out again, sweating a little perhaps, from both concentration and exertion...

Shimmering mirage in the June heat; frozen, deserted fastness when the east wind blows in January.

How to describe it, this prospect?

It is, they say: *An expansive, flat, low-lying, sometimes remote estuarine landscape, dominated by the Humber and with an ever-changing character due to tidal influences.*

It is: *A predominantly reclaimed former inter-tidal landscape of rectilinear fields with boundaries formed by dykes, drains and embankments.*

There is: *dominance of sky and open views over the estuary, mudflats and salt marshes where flood embankments allow.* They say.

There are: internationally important coastal mudflats and other wetland and coastal habitats; lagoons, salt meadows, pioneer salt marsh, mudflats and sand-flats not covered at low tide, tidal reed-beds, un-vegetated sand and shingle. They say.

It is: the haunt of river lamprey and sea lamprey: three foot long lampreys – creatures without ribs, scales, jaws; with a fold in the skin in place of fins; no real skeleton, only cartilaginous apology; and serrated sucker for mouth...Monsters...lurking...river-deep...

**Sixth circle:** feeling disorientated, in danger of losing track, or of drowning...

*Between Trent-fall and Whitten-ness*

*Many are made widows and fatherless.*

Goes the saying...

Trent Falls: *a perpetual rendezvous of waters; draining one fifth of England...*

Daniel Defoe looks out, in 1726:

*A wonderful conflux of great rivers, all pouring down into the Humber, which receiving the Aire, the Ouse, the Don and the Trent, becomes rather a sea than a river.*

As does parish poet Edith Spilman Dudley in 1946:

*Where Humber, Ouse, and silvery Trent*

*Join hands at watersmeet;*

*Where brown-sailed barges homeward glide*

*On tides that never cease –*

And again in 1953:

*From Gunnes side o'er broadening Trent  
The lovely scene which pleases much,  
Tho' Lincolnshire it surely is.  
Seems most peculiarly Dutch –*

**Seventh circle:** sensing time become folded...

In the photographs of 1891, the Trent is a confused mass of bergs: men stand in front of the ship in peril, tilting precariously, perplexingly; there is nothing to be done – as helpless as Shackleton's men before the crippled *Endurance*.

In 1940 it is frozen again – dirty, untidy plates, as disordered and daunting as the plates thrown up by circulation of the Antarctic seas.

Here: are the single-masted, Humber keels – with large square sails, expanses of canvas – waiting for a breath of wind...

And on 28 February 1901 a forty-three foot long whale is stranded nearby: boat owners charge two-pence for a trip out, to where men in overcoats and mackintoshes stand on the back of the beached leviathan: *Call me Ishmael!*

In 1937, River Authority engineer Mr Toogood – Oxford bags, pipe, foot on the capstan of SS Pan/er/gic – points out the training wall and warning beacon at Trent Falls, the strengthened river-banks at Adlingfleet Drain...

William Stonehouse looking out in 1839 surmises that before cultivation, the Trent '*most probably lost itself in that low marshy country...*

All that *was* once delta *is* now embanked, canalised, controlled...they hope: for the passage of larger vessels that seem to float on the land, disconcerting close up...

**Eighth circle:** needing a rest, a little breathless perhaps, in the cloistered interior?

Always a matter of organising, reorganising, bulwarking here...

*Before* 1765, there was Alkborough Common, The Ings, Bonding, Sunken Dale, West Dykes...*After:* the arable and pasture-lands of Christopher Goulton who had 642 acres

and John Dent 340 acres. And people went to live down on the flat: at a farm at Trent Ness, at Alkborough Flatts Farm – flats with two Ts.

In the photographs, they are making hay:

– a white horse, cart, man in tie and boater on the shafts; two boys and a Jack Russell on the load. A two-storey, one up, one down cottage at rear – a teapot lodge.

– girls in summer hats, riding cart-horses, side-saddle.

– men with great rakes, in shirt sleeves – collarless, waistcoats, corduroy trousers, belts and braces but no string below the knees to stop rats running up legs, flat caps.

Doubtless chestnut forearms; farmers' tans; raking, stooking, inevitably leaning...

– a great Lincolnshire wagon, smaller wheels at front, curved like a ship: it would float, this pink galleon, were floods to come. Or the Aegir to burst free...

– and Lincolnshire Shires: the 'business', built to pull the heaviest loads.

It is hot; exposed; no trees with the promise of shade...

A land reclaimed over many years, farmed intensively, especially since the 1950s; last embanked in 1956. Strength and resolve...strengthened and resolved...

**Ninth circle:** trying to stay upright, through dizzy and footsore...

But always the uneasy presence and proximity of water...angry God...

And it comes in 1954, in a huge tidal surge that breaches the defences...

And now down there, in this seemingly placid scene, big decisions are being made, 21<sup>st</sup> century decisions: about valuing and re-evaluating...

In changed and changing circumstances, there are but three options: fighting; realignment; abandonment....

Call it: a long-term strategy of adaptation to sea-level rise; a *sustainable and effective flood and coastal defence technique*; managed retreat; resilience...

Call it: natural hazard regulation; alleviation; flood storage...

Call it: restoration; litigation of losses; balancing long-term gains and losses in the estuary over 50 years; the creation of compensatory habitats from coastal squeeze...

Call it: enhancing bio-diversity...

Call it: making a landscape...

Call it: making room for the river, calming its fury...

Call it: losing the energy or the means or the will to resist...

Or sweeping sand from a beach...

Call it: placating the angry God...

The solution then: punch a hole in the sea-bank; retreat to higher ground; open a controlled wash-land to contain the overflow; to reduce water levels further upstream during an extreme event. The bank would have gone anyway, to settlement and erosion. And on 7 September 2007 it is breached: a twenty metre wide inlet, with boulder sill. £10,000,000 it cost; requiring the demolition of 'dangerous structures' – Flatt's Farm. Dramatically, dynamically and progressively altering the site's character.

But it's the water that's doing the work of making the landscape: the environment *agency*

Unpredictably, as it finds its level; what's going on out there, not entirely clear.

So set *aside*, access restricted...

Sediment building more rapidly than expected: warping...

Vegetation abounding, creating – thankfully – a view that might have been muddy morass...

Where *were* pink-footed geese and wigeon *are* now spoonbills, marsh harriers, ospreys, avocets, ruffs. Bitterns and cranes and bearded tits will surely follow shortly. And eels: just a little bit of history repeating...

Where once wheat, now grass for grazing: 100 Black Hebridean sheep; Limousin cattle...

But also a place of isolated fingerposts; forlorn scarecrows; abandoned farm machinery...

And warning notices and admonitory signs: Liable to flood; Deep water; Deep mud;

Tidal waters; Keep to the footpath; Danger thin ice; Caution shooting taking place between September 1<sup>st</sup> and February 20<sup>th</sup>.

It may, they hope, be an inspiration for art, folklore, architecture; critically helping people understand 'nature'. But it will take time, they say, to ascertain what benefits might accrue and how much they are worth; so no monetary value is assigned.

**Tenth circle:** re-energised now, ready for the final push...almost there...

*You are standing at a latitude of 53 degrees 41 minutes North, longitude 0 degrees 40 minutes West. National Grid reference SE 880-217 and at a height of 131 feet (40 metres) above mean sea level; a time capsule is concealed beneath* reads the adjacent Millennium Plaque.

The landscape cast in brass relief directs you to the cooling towers of power stations at Ferrybridge, Eggborough, Drax; Ousefleet lighthouse, Blacktoft Sand, Trent Falls (2.38 kms)...And Flats Farm (1.4 km)...But no wetlands...in the year 2000, yet to appear.

The depiction already its own time capsule; the scene already altered, already gone. Different prospects...

So finally, look down, at your feet...

The repeated tread and re-cutting of the 11 rings of this unicursal turf maze – 44 feet in diameter – have caused it to sink slowly: more dish or tilted saucer now.

In 1724, William Stukeley knew: *the boys to this day divert themselves with running it one after another which leads by many windings quite through and back.*

In 1800, Alkborough people still ran it: *in and out of the company of others.*

By 1870 it was decayed.

In 1887 James Goulton Constable of Walcot Hall made a lead copy on the floor of the church porch *to ensure the correct re-cutting of the maze*, echoing it in a stained glass window, and on his gravestone. It was he who *distinguished* it once more, in that surge of high-Victorian enthusiasm for the folkloric. He favoured the Benedictines: *They built the windmill that stood in Walcot until comparatively recent years, and I have not the slightest doubt they made the maze we call 'Julian's Bower'*

The footfall of religion still echoes here:

*According to one legend, Julian's Bower was supposed to have been cut as a penance by a knight who was involved in the assassination of Thomas a Becket. He was told to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem to expiate the crime but as this was impossible, he a labyrinth made instead.*

But fun too:

Local author Ian Thompson: *Try walking the maze with a partner, putting a turn's space between the two of you, and you will find that you repeatedly meet and part on neighbouring paths.*

**Eleventh circle:** without hesitation, deviation or repetition...

Make your choice here; go as you wish...

But now – finally at the centre – pause and look out, one last time.

12,000 years ago, it would have been over the icy melt-waters of the great, impounded Lake Humber; before the wandering Trent reached its northern bed...

Now, over a scene of erasure and rewriting, of 'winning' and 'letting go' and 'doing the best we can under the circumstances'...

Of wilding, this time...

*Then might you gather froth where now is dew, rotten weeds for sweet roses, and take view of monstrous mermaids instead of passing fair maids.*